

## Buffalo Soldiers in the Trenches

By the time American troops got to Europe in 1917, African-Americans had an established, but not celebrated history in military service of our country. In 1862, under the direction of Thomas Wentworth Higginson, the sworn abolitionist and literary heartthrob of Emily Dickinson, the first federally authorized Black military unit, the First South Carolina Volunteers, went to war.

In 1863, the 54th Voluntary Massachusetts Infantry, provided a bloody frontal assault on Ft. Wagner, Charleston, West Virginia, on July 18, 1863, a story boldly told in *Glory* (1989), starring Denzel Washington.

When the Civil War ended, African-Americans were recruited for a unit that became known as the “Buffalo Soldiers,” a cavalry regiment based at Ft. Leavenworth, Kansas.

African-American rough-riders stormed San Juan Hill with Teddy Roosevelt, even stepped in between cattlemen and ranchers in Wyoming’s Johnson County War.

Still, by 1915 white American Doughboys weren’t thrilled with Black sidekicks. African-Americans believed their service offered a place in society otherwise flatly unachievable. Within a week of Wilson’s Declaration of War, the army stopped enlisting Black volunteers because their quota was full. Eventually, 350,000 would serve.

But racism was everywhere, as was enforced segregation. Still, by the end of the war, the armed forces offered more and varied opportunities for Black men than those Black men would have found had they never left home. Black troops served in cavalry, infantry, signal, medical, engineer, and artillery units, as chaplains, surveyors, truck drivers, chemists, and intelligence

officers. Still, often as not, white men refused to salute Black officers and most enlisted African-Americans did only the lowliest service jobs.

Before the Declaration, W. E. B DuBois warned Black folks that the First World War wasn't just a white man's war. In an essay titled "White Imperialism," DeBois called that attitude a mistake. "The present war in Europe," he wrote, "is one of the great disasters due to race and color prejudice and it but foreshadows greater disasters in the future."

DuBois claimed the war in France and Belgium pitted powers whose major interest was imperialist, conquering and taking control of lands and people they could exploit.

Asia, Africa, the South Sea Islands, the West Indies, Mexico and Central America and much of South America have long been designated by the white world as fit field for this kind of commercial exploitation, for the benefit of Europe and with little regard for the welfare of the natives.

That kind of exploitation is only one kind of racial "abuse." There is another, DuBois says. "In this way a theory of the inferiority of the darker peoples and a contempt for their rights and aspirations has become all but universal in the greatest centers of modern culture."

That line is 104 years old. But I seem to remember a remarkable American newsmaker just recently wondering aloud why America doesn't recruit more Norwegian immigrants. "Why are we having all these people from sh\*thole countries come here?" he said. A century later, DuBois still had it right.

For the record, in two weeks of intense, hand-to-hand combat at Champagne, the 372nd Infantry of the 93rd Regiment, all African-Americans, suffered 600 casualties. The French government awarded the entire unit the Croix de Guerre, with 43 officers, 14 noncommissioned officers, and 116 privates

receiving either the Croix de Guerre or the Distinguished Service Cross. And there were many more.

On 11 November 1918 at 1100 hours, the war ended. African American troops celebrated, I'm sure, with hugs and shouts of joy and relief. But a price was paid. 53,000 Doughboys didn't return. The 92d Division and 93rd Divisions, both African-American, suffered more than 5000 casualties.

When they got stateside, most African-American veterans, battle-weary, walked home into the world of Jim Crow.